European Community

Research programmes trimmed

Brussels

ONE of the European Community's summer rituals is a decision by its finance ministers to slash planned spending on scientific research projects. The executive Commission always complies with little protest, for it knows that one of its own winter rituals is to reverse the decision, bringing research spending back to the level originally planned.

But this year, things may be different. Runaway farm spending and a rebate of 750 million ECU (1 ECU = £0.57) on Britain's 1983 budget contribution threaten to empty the Community's coffers before the end of the year.

Everybody agrees that something has to be done to relieve the Community's financial hardship, just as there is a consensus over the need to boost Community research spending. European leaders solemnly stated at their summit meeting in Stuttgart that "lasting solutions" were to be found at their next meeting, in December in Athens. The Athens summit will also deal with the Commission's proposal to increase the contributions of member states to the Community budget to allow for the development of European social, regional and scientific policies.

But it seems unlikely that the hoped-for extra money will be made available, and two of the principal victims will be the ambitious five-year framework programme for research and development of Vicomte Etienne Davignon, Commissioner for Research and Industry, and the ten-year, 1,500 million ECU strategic programme for research in information technologies (Esprit). Officials expect little from the Athens summit. "It's too short notice. At the most, they will agree on cutting farm spending, but national contributions won't be increased before 1985 or 1986 at the earliest", said one Dutch diplomat. "And as long as there is no fresh money, there will be no new policies — European Community laws state that farm spending is compulsory while spending on, say, research is not."

Davignon is unlikely to accept this point of view. First of all, he can count on the European Parliament to support more Community research. And so far, his battle for a stronger European research and development policy has not been unsuccessful. European research ministers have endorsed the outline of his five-year research and development framework programme and the need to increase Community spending substantially over the next few years. He has been congratulated on his efforts to attract European industry into Community-managed research schemes such as Esprit and has been urged to devise similar plans for biotechnology and telecommunications. "And these political statements will have to be honoured financially", says Jean-Claude Brouwers, Davignon's principal aide for budgetary and scientific matters.

But Brouwers may be over-optimistic. At their marathon meeting on 22 July, finance ministers had little hesitation in cutting back on previously agreed support for next year. "This is very serious", says Rainer Gerold, Commission director for research budget matters. "Take our programme for radioprotection. The council reduces allowances by 4 million ECU to 7 million ECU — admittedly a small sum compared with total spending cuts of more than 90 million out of the requested 540 million ECU — but the loss cannot be made good in 1985 because the programme runs out at the end of next year. This means that we lack the financial means properly to evaluate the research results, and that the money we have invested previously has, at least partly, gone to waste. And this is only one example."

The Council of Ministers has been equally hard-hearted in allowing for new posts. In all, three new posts out of the 66 proposed have been agreed. "Another striking example of shortsightedness", says Brouwers. "We get the money to launch a programme, but we cannot hire the experts that have to run the show. Take Esprit. We expect the programme to employ more than 2,000 highly-qualified researchers in industry. But our application for 91 officials to run the programme, 25 next year, is flatly turned down."

In all, finance ministers reduced the Commission's demands for existing programmes by 47.3 million ECU to 239.6 million ECU, with sharp cuts in research on raw materials (from 17 million to 12 million ECU), fusion research (from 94.4 to 80 million ECU) and operating costs for the Joint European Torus (JET) at Culham in the United Kingdom (down 5 million ECU to 95 million ECU). New programmes have also suffered severe cutbacks, totalling approximately 32 million ECU out of the 111 million ECU requested, although Esprit seems to have been spared with allowances of up to 45 million ECU, or 3 million ECU less than was asked for and largely explained by the denial of posts for officials. The Joint Research Centre has to contribute its share in savings with cutbacks totalling 26.7 million ECU from a requested 192 million ECU for 1984.

The next negotiating round between Davignon and the finance ministers will take place after the summer. Before that, officials say, the Commission will try to convince the European Parliament, which has extensive budgetary powers, to restore the financial proposals to their original shape. But officials and diplomats agree that there is little ground for optimism about the final outcome of the negotiations in December.

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Albanian science

Flickers of interest again

ALBANIA is planning almost to double its scientific and technological "information base" by the creation of four new scientific centres under the Academy of Sciences. This decision, announced last week in a bland dispatch from the official news-agency ATA, appears to be related to the secret debate believed to be taking place among government and party officials about how far Albania can pursue party-leader Enver Hoxha's policy of economic self-sufficiency and at the same time bring its technology up to date.

This debate is believed by Albania-watchers to have resulted, in autumn 1981, in the "suicide" and subsequent denigration of Mehmed Shehu, for many years Mr Hoxha's closest lieutenant. During the past eighteen months, there have also been signs that the Albanian Academy of Sciences and Tirana University wish to expand scientific and academic links abroad, particularly in postgraduate training.

At present, Albanian scientists and technologists can gain access to Western research — and, for that matter, Eastern-bloc research — mainly through documentation centres at home. These include a Centre of Scientific and Technical Information and Documentation and the four existing centres operating under the academy which cover geology/mining, agriculture, oil and mechanics.

The four new centres announced by ATA will deal with energy, metallurgy, ore processing and oil technology. It is not explained how the competence of the existing "oil" and protected "oil technology" centres will be divided, but between them the eight centres will cover all the main Albanian primary production sectors.

The task of the centres, according to ATA, is the "gathering and systematization" of all domestic and foreign "studies, projects, articles and various data" in the relevant fields. Because of the small research base of Albania (the country has produced in all only 30,000 graduates during the 25 years of existence of Tirana University), it is clear that most of the information must come from foreign sources. Just how far the Albanians can utilize even middle technology without closer contacts abroad is somewhat doubtful.

The few hand-picked foreign visitors who have been allowed into Albania in the past eighteen months report that human muscle-power is still largely the basis of agriculture and the occasional prestige engineering project (road, railway, hydroelectric plant), while the foreign imports of the 1960s (before the total clampdown), such as modern greenhouses from the Netherlands, have been allowed to fall into disrepair for lack of maintenance know-how.

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